

Halle / Leipzig

Barely forty kilometres separate the cities of Halle an der Saale and Leipzig. The former, with 247,000 inhabitants, lies in the federal state of Saxony-Anhalt, the latter, with a population of 493,000, is in Saxony. Halle has been an industrial city since the nineteenth century; Leipzig has been a centre of trade and commerce for time immemorial. Both were once part of a region that was characterised by coal-mining and gigantic chemical engineering works for almost one-and-a-half centuries.

Albeit much desired by the citizens of the former GDR, the unification of East and West Germany brought with it a dramatic transformation in their lives. The privatisation of nationalised businesses was followed, in many cases, by their closure. The future, it was said, belongs to the service sector. This failed to recognise that a wealth-creating service industry for business requires an industrial base. Currently, economic growth in eastern Germany does not even reach the average for the European Union. In the Halle / Leipzig region, the restructuring of the economy has resulted, instead, in unemployment of over 20 percent.

Shrinkage and Growth

Halle now has nearly 70,000 fewer inhabitants than it did at the end of the GDR. In Leipzig, this figure is almost 100,000. Whereas, in the first half of the Nineties, migration within Germany to the old, western states was primarily responsible for this development, its main cause in the second half of the Nineties was suburbanisation. Factors such as tax exemption for investors, private housing subsidy, the spread of shopping centres and relocation of large businesses led to a building boom that used up green-field sites on a large scale. It may seem paradoxical, but the reality is that shrinkage and growth went hand in hand: the cities' loss was the countryside's gain.

The generation of those who were already in work and had families was particularly hard hit by changes in personal circumstances during the Nineties. Insecurity due to social conditions in the Halle / Leipzig region (including Weißenfels, a Baroque town, and Bitterfeld and Wolfen, small towns dependent on the chemicals industry) led to a situation in which the birth-rate today is only half of what it was before the end of the GDR.

Halle

Halle an der Saale, once famous for its salt, was a centre of the GDR's chemicals industry and one of its fifteen regional capitals. It was considerably enlarged by the construction of Halle-Neustadt, which began in the mid-Sixties. By 1990, about 94,000 people lived in the new district's pre-fabricated blocks of flats, most of them the families of workers in the area's large chemical combines.

After 1989, Halle tried to compensate for the collapse



of its industrial base (mostly vehicle manufacture and mechanical engineering) by promoting administrative, scientific and cultural facilities. New buildings were added to the campus of the Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg, lying adjacent to the historical city centre. The number of students was virtually doubled to almost 16,000. The fringe of the old centre was given a further boost by the building of a complex housing the Georg Friedrich Händel Concert Hall and Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk broadcasting centre.

Nevertheless, the city is suffering from a vacancy rate of 20 percent of its buildings. Other than might be expected, lack of demand is affecting the old city and the new town district more or less equally. In the housing estates of the Seventies, large-scale demolitions are planned with the aid of the "Stadtumbau Ost" restructuring programme.

Leipzig

At the end of the Eighties, probably none of the GDR's major cities had such a down-at-heel appearance as Leipzig. A centre of commerce long before its famous trade fair began, the city concentrated its efforts on revitalising the historical centre, as can be seen from the gentrification of the main railway station, the old merchants' warehouses and the shopping streets. Although three-quarters of the old buildings were rehabilitated during the Nineties, the migration of people away from the city could not be halted. Of 320,000 flats, 55,000 are still unoccupied today, although this figure is, fortunately, falling slowly.

In Leipzig, as in other cities, urban shrinkage exists side by side with suburban growth. 34,000 semi-detached houses alone have been built on its outskirts. Nearly half of the firms on the periphery have relocated there from a site in the city proper. Moreover, the first elements of a globally-oriented economy are growing up on Leipzig's northern fringe, in the shape of the airport, motorway, freight transport centre, the new Trade Fair complex and the new BMW car plant, designed by Zaha Hadid.

In spite of enormous problems, not least in its eastern districts and the Grünau estate, Leipzig is seen as a winner of German unification. The city has managed to maintain the high status of its Trade Fair; and even the Book Fair has stood up well to its competitor in Frankfurt. In 2003, Leipzig succeeded in its bid to become Germany's candidate for the Olympic Games in 2012.

Bitterfeld and Wolfen

Lying in the north of the federal state of Saxony-Anhalt, Bitterfeld and Wolfen are now incorporated as one town. Both of them were epitomes of the GDR's chemical and coal-mining industries. In the Nineties, 1,200 hectares of



the former chemical combine found new use as the “Chemie Park Bitterfeld Wolfen”, home to about 350 mostly small businesses.

Wolfen consists of old village houses at its centre, garden city-style worker's housing from the nineteen-tens to the nineteen-thirties and a mass housing estate erected in 1958. In the GDR, photographic film was manufactured there, but after 1990, a large number of chemicals works were closed. Whereas in 1989, the town still had 45,600 inhabitants, in 2000 only 27,050 of them remained. The message of the figures on the town council's web site is clear. The balance on 31st December 2002 is given as follows: 162 births; 323 deaths; 936 new arrivals and 2,033 departures. Flats, nursery schools and schools are now being knocked down in the large estate of Wolfen-Nord. It is even planned to tear up whole streets.

Weißenfels

The baroque old town centre dates from a brief period, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when Weißenfels was the official residence of the Dukes of Saxony-Weißenfels. This small town on the River Saale, south-west of Halle and Leipzig, used to produce food-stuffs and shoes. Today, the German army is an important factor in the local economy, with 1,600 soldiers stationed in the Saxony-Anhalt Barracks.

The restoration of the town centre is only progressing slowly, because there is neither enough money, nor a practical use for many of the buildings, which are protected for their historical value. With a drop in the population from 36,865 in 1990 to 30,781 in 2002, 21 percent of buildings are now standing empty.

